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# The New Ruins of North Cyprus

Jim Roche 2013

## **A corner of Earth touched by Heaven**

In the early 1990's, North Cyprus (or the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus as declared since 1983) was marketed by its tourist board as "A corner of Earth touched by Heaven". This referred to its variety of unspoiled hill walks, its ancient olive groves, its myriad display of wild flowers in Springtime, its reputation as a spotting place for migratory birds in spring and autumn and its uncrowded beaches, some with well-preserved turtle nesting sites.

It also has the rocky karst and sparsely vegetated hills of the Kyrenian Range that contrast against the wonderful flat expanse of the central plains and the wild eastern 'pan handle' of the Karpas Peninsula.

Add to this an abundance of ancient archaeological and historical sites which attest to layers of civilisations and cultures that have inhabited this paradisaical but troubled island. For example perched atop the three high peaks of the Kyrenia range are the ruined Crusader Castles of St. Hilarion, Buffavento and Kantara that afforded the 12th century colonisers panoramic views of the vast central plains and the whole northern coastline.



*From left: Roman ruins at Salamis, Girne-Kyrenia Castle and St. Hilarion Crusader Fortress*

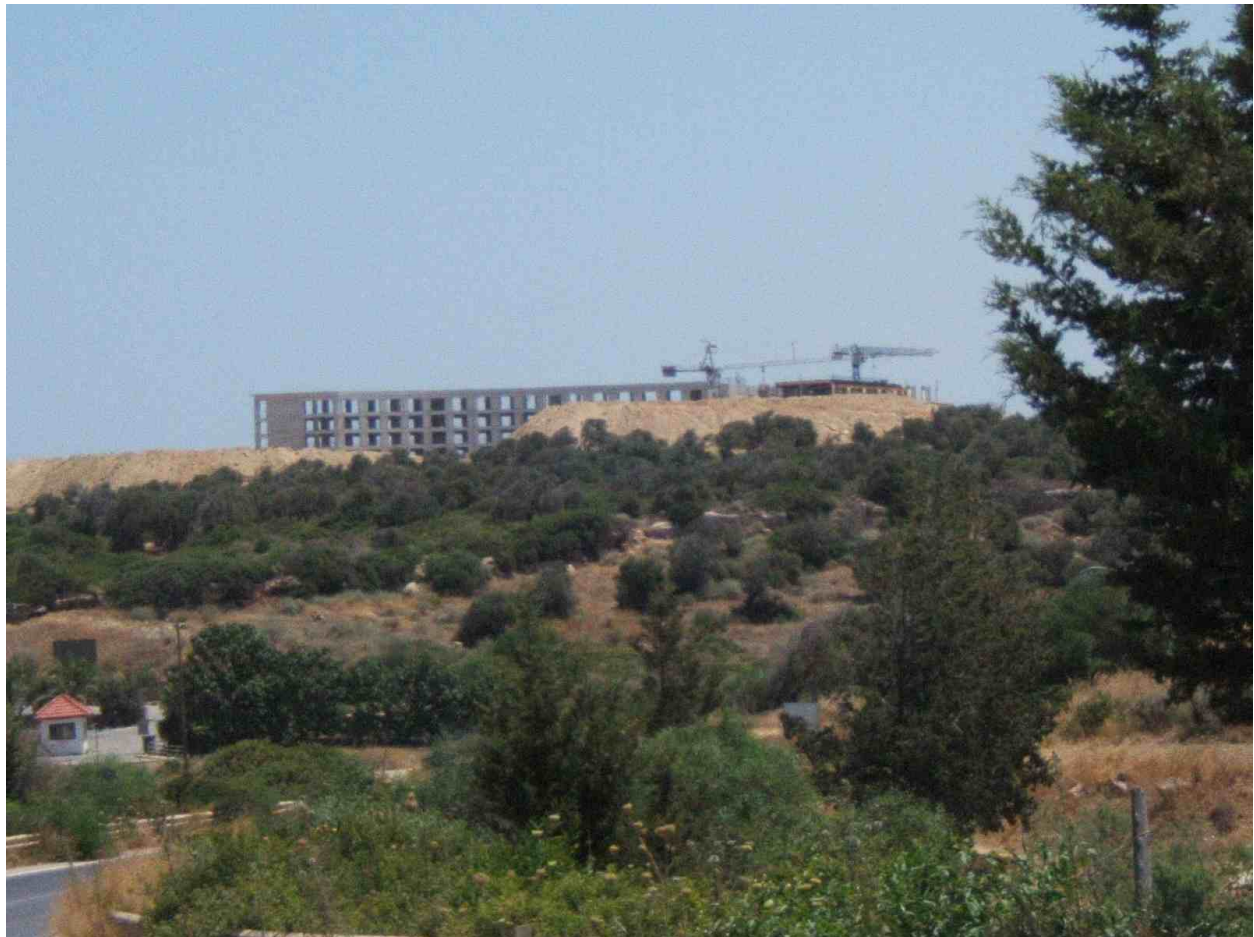
A key attraction for discerning tourists was the lack of overtly commercial development and the sense that time had stood still since the forced division of the island in 1974. For several years throughout the 1990s a tourist conference was held with the theme 'Don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg' - meaning don't destroy the unique physical character that North Cyprus had.

Well, North Cyprus has truly killed the goose, without retrieving any golden eggs, and its new modern ruins now despoil what was once a unique, natural landscape. "A corner of Earth touched by Heaven" has now become "A corner of Earth ravaged by Bulldozers" as one long standing ex-patriate said.

## **New developments**

The last eight years has witnessed a war of attrition, fueled by a lethal cocktail of political imperative and speculative greed and expressed with tar and cement as new holiday housing estates and Casino Hotels have been strewn ad-hoc fashion on the pristine natural landscape. Many of them are now left unfinished or unoccupied. The building spree was so intense for several years that the main by-pass road to the north of Kyrenia-Girne was blocked by construction traffic for several hours daily.

The new mega hotels with a minimum of 50 bedrooms, many close to Kyrenia–Girne, are almost all constructed and managed by Turkish Consortia, with some limited investment from Israel and Russia. Their vast bulks, one currently rising as a concrete skeleton close to Turtle Beach (pic), command sea views like the ancient fortresses of old.



*Concrete skeleton of a new casino hotel*

The majority Turkish mainland clientele come primarily to gamble which is forbidden in Turkey. The all-inclusive package deals are paid for in Turkey hence little, if any, investment goes to the local economy in North Cyprus. The clientele generally lay siege to the Casino Hotel for the duration of their holiday. Since the relaxation in border crossings in 2003 many rich Greek Cypriots males also frequent the Casino Hotels both to gamble and, reputedly, to avail of cheaper prostitution than in South Cyprus.

One of the long established ex-patriots interviewed for this article said: “it is sad that small family run hotels are no longer encouraged. The North Cypriot government pays lip service to ‘special tourism’ but does nothing to encourage it. North Cyprus had supposedly 350,000 tourists in one year but 300,000 of these were mainland Turks coming to gamble.”

One of these newer Casino Hotels in Girne-Kyrenia is named, without a hint of irony, ‘The Colony’.

While the Casino Hotels are at least restricted to specific areas the same cannot be said for the splurge of new holiday homes examples of which are visible along the new road eastwards from Kyrenia-Girne to Esentepe, an historic village in the foothills of the Kyrenia Range. Ghostly concrete skeleton structures sit cheek-by-jowl with half completed white walled and red tiled houses against a palette of parched buff landscape and azure seascape.



*Completed but unoccupied new houses off the new road to Esentepe*

These new settlements and their connecting roads ignore the natural topography of the land, have destroyed many of the scenic walks and country drives and have completely obliterated old roads. One ex-patriot interviewee called these developments: “a brutal anarchic establishment of infrastructure” noting that “if you have a puncture you can’t get off the new road as the lay-by either side is too narrow. One English couple had to drive 5-6 km on a flat tyre before they could pull over safely. Very high embankments have been formed which have often not got adequate drainage so that when it rains in winter, water is trapped behind the embankments some of which have subsided.”

Developers and buyers have been a mix of British and London Cypriot with some Russian buyers also. The bulk of marketing focussed on the UK with many purchasing the property without even seeing it. Sales have seriously deteriorated in the last few years leaving the whole destructive shambles like a strange mix of Costa del Sol meets the worst excesses of Celtic Tiger Ireland. Many of the skeletal concrete remains suggest a weird reverse structural take on Rachel Whithead’s 1993 Turner Prize award winning ‘House’ sculpture in London’s East End.

Many traditional Cypriot villages have also been inundated with English pubs complete with all the recognisable paraphernalia of the home country like karaoke, the big football screens, darts, beer gardens, several British and Irish beers on tap, quiz nights etc. The Euro Cup Final could be watched in one such establishment just opposite a Mosque. “A pint of John Smith’s real ale. That’ll be six lira, ok dahwling?” - the experience is both surreal and sad. These establishments are almost only ever frequented by new ex-pats or their visitor friends. In May this year one such bar in Esentepe witnessed a punch up between Irish and British male revellers that left the local Cypriot owner with a broken nose.



But why did the relative backwater of North Cyprus, a state not recognised internationally except by Turkey and effectively blockaded by the world community, develop in this haphazard manner?

#### **Annan Peace Plan 2004**

A look at the Annan UN Peace Plan dated 31 March 2004, and of the reactions of certain vested interest groups to the defeated referendum on it, gives some clues as to why such unregulated physical development occurred in North Cyprus since 2004.

The Annan V Plan was the fifth and final version of a proposal, instigated after the G8 Summit in Summer of 1999, to finally solve the 'Cyprus Problem'. The geo-political context of the Annan Plan was the desire for EU expansion eastwards, the impending accession of the republic of Cyprus to membership and the concern in the US and UK camps that this could scupper Turkey's chance of joining. Hence the rush, through the aegis of the UN, to sort out the Cyprus Problem.

The negotiations were rubber stamped by the UN Security Council and Kofi Annan duly appointed. His real power was unclear though. Perry Anderson, in a 2008 article titled *The Divisions of Cyprus*, called him a "dummy for anglo American ventriloquists"; these being in this case Sir David Hannay, Britain's former Ambassador to the UN and Tom Weston, Special Coordinator of the US State Department on Cyprus.

Yet again the fate of Cyprus was to be manipulated by greater foreign powers. David Hannay in his book *Cyprus: the search for a solution* is explicit on this when he notes: "The enlargement of the EU was a major objective of British foreign policy and must in no way be damaged by developments over Cyprus".

Annan and US diplomats applied pressure on the Cypriot leaders Papadopoulos and Denktash to accept it or else put it to the Cypriot electorate. So much for independent democracy - on both sides of the Green Line!

The final version, Annan V, was announced on 31 March 2004 with Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey declaring it "the greatest victory for Turkey since the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923" - enough to make anyone suspicious of its real intentions. Greek Cypriot accession to the EU was due on 01 May so the referendum machine swung into immediate action to achieve the right result on 24 April.

The Turkish Cypriot 'yes' vote was practically guaranteed but the combined efforts of Washington, London and Brussels and the UN Security Council (where, unusually, a vote of endorsement was taken), were applied to convince the Greek Cypriot people and political parties. The latter rejected it by a large majority, the final results being Turkish Cypriots 65% 'for', Greek Cypriots 75% 'against'.

The three fundamental sections of the Annan V Plan were firstly, the description of the new bi-communal state, secondly, how territory, property and residence would be dealt with and the third element dealt with military forces and international law.

Some minor physical development occurred after the peaceful euphoria of the opening of the borders between South and North Cyprus in April 2003 but it is the second element of the Annan V Plan that is key to understanding the orgy of speculation that escalated in North Cyprus after the failed referendum of April 2004. Article 14 of the second section of the plan,

titled 'Significantly improved property', states: *"The owner of a significant improvement to an affected property may apply to receive title to that property, in exchange for payment of the current value of the affected property without the improvement."*

The new developments, post-Annan Plan referendum, attempted to both improve the monetary value of the land and its legal ownership. Local Cypriot journalist Simon Bahceli says "some of the clauses in the Annan Plan gave incentives to Turkish Cypriots to build on the Greek Cypriot owned property where they had lived since 1974 for fear of losing it in a settlement. After the rejection of Annan V, estate agents began telling customers that Greek Cypriots did not want their land back."

The interpretation of 'improved property' in the section of Annan V quoted above was thus for many, according to Bahceli, "to build on it." He says that: "inadvertently the rejection of the Annan Plan by Greek Cypriots created the building boom in North Cyprus because the impression was given by estate agents that Greek Cypriots had waived their rights to their properties. Lots of developers then went mad borrowing, buying, building and selling, over and over again, until the bubble finally burst." This phenomenon should sound strangely familiar to Irish ears.

The whole orgy of speculative development was compounded by the lack of a coherent master plan. Though the TRNC Government issued the odd directive these were more aspirational than legally binding. Bahceli says "they should have put a moratorium on building on Greek Cypriot land which represents 80% of all land in the TRNC. The Government actually made it easy for foreigners to buy Greek Cypriot land but difficult to buy land with Turkish Cypriot title deeds".

One of the key deterrents to major development in North Cyprus since the Turkish invasion of 1974 has been the uncertain legal status of building on land with Greek Cypriot title deeds, land since occupied by both Turkish Cypriots and Turkish mainland settlers. The legal ownership status of these properties was effectively in limbo since 1974 pending an eventual settlement of the divided island.

The rejection of the Annan V Plan by Greek Cypriot voters, and its acceptance by Turkish Cypriots, was interpreted and manipulated by certain political forces and vested interests in the TRNC as a carte blanche to 'improve' by development, property with Greek Cypriot title deeds. After the failed referendum the physical development of North Cyprus escalated at a gigantic rate. According to one ex-patriot: "In the area around Morphou-Guzelyurt the clear understanding among many locals was - 'build on it and its yours' - with many local TRNC press reports at the time hinting at a nod of approval from Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan."



*New ghostly ruins off the new road to Esentepe and the road itself*

This manipulation by politicians and vested interest groups of disillusionment among ordinary citizens with the failed referendum resulted in an orgy of unregulated building the results of which can be seen strewn along the northern coast. Considering the wider context of the Annan Plan the ghostly remains of the building boom bubble on the virgin landscape of Cyprus are yet another legacy of geo-political manoeuvring by local, regional and world political powers on this strategic, colonised island.

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